

Talk to me!

Real-time audio-conferencing and the changing roles of the teacher and the learner in a 24/7 environment.

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1. Introduction

The model of distance learning in which Open University [OU] language learners take part is the 'traditional' one for the OU – print, video, audio and face-to-face tutorials. However, since the presentation of its first language course in 1995, the Centre for Modern Languages [CML] has actively investigated alternative means for the provision of language teaching and learning. This paper describes the projects undertaken over the past five years with a particular focus on the most recent studies, the Fluent Project [The establishment of a Framework for Language Use in Environments embedded in New Technologies] which used synchronous voice-over-Internet conferencing with learners of French and German and recent trials with Lyceum, an integrated audiographics package. We briefly discuss the role of the tutor in such virtual learning environments [VLEs] and we summarise learner responses and learning outcomes. Data collected include copies of student e-mail, audio recordings of the individual scheduled sessions, tutor observations and learner feedback obtained through a series of questionnaires.

2. Telephone conferencing

Learning languages at a distance is problematic in terms of practising speaking and listening skills, since learners work mainly at home, on their own. While students of OU language courses are offered up to 21 hours per year of face-to-face tutorials, feedback suggests that most would like increased opportunities to practise speaking and listening in the target language. From 1995-1997, then, to address this need, researchers at the CML pilot tested telephone conferencing for students who were unable or unwilling to attend their regular tutorials.

In 1997, the learning environment was expanded to include e-mail as well as telephone conferencing. This development provided learners with a tool which allowed them to work with each other between telephone conferences. Six to eight learners participated in three activities which required them to collaborate in order to reach a joint outcome. Each activity began with an introductory telephone conference during which students received details of their task and concluded with a second telephone conference in which the learning outcomes were presented. In the interim period, learners were asked to communicate with each other and with their tutors via e-mail to prepare their final session.

It was found that, compared to telephone conferencing without e-mail support, the rehearsal of contributions allowed by e-mail improved the output in the final session in terms of students' fluency and confidence as well as with regard to their ability to ask questions, to request clarification and to express disagreement (Stevens & Hewer 1998). Results of this study also suggest, however, that some learners initially lacked spontaneity or prepared contributions to the extent that they read out answers rather than taking the risks involved in real time interactions.

3. The Fluent Project

By 1998, the increased robustness of Internet audio technology allowed more flexibility in terms of synchronous collaboration than does telephone conferencing (facilities are available on a 24/7 basis and need not be booked in advance), and two pilot studies were set up in 1998 and 1999 using voice-over-Internet applications. It was hypothesised that factors affecting learner behaviour in telephone conferencing would resurface in the new, Internet-based environment, but that its increased flexibility would reduce students' reluctance to take risks during scheduled learning events, since they would be able to practise their speaking skills at any time they and their peers could arrange to be online together between those events. Moreover, it was assumed that the richer learning environment and its greater availability would not only foster learners' fluency and their re-cycling of previously acquired vocabulary and structures in new settings, but that it would further improve the learning experience as, unlike the learning environments previously offered, students could meet at times appropriate to their own needs and even form real time self-help groups.

From October 1998 to January 1999 and from March to June 1999, a total of seventy-five students met once a week with their tutor in one of nine groups in order to collaborate on three learning activities. The first phase of this study took place in between the OU's academic years (October-January) while the second phase ran alongside learners' regular course work (February-March). Students were recruited from the first-level German course and from the final French course. The former course requires a target language competence roughly equivalent to O-level or GCSE while by the end of the latter, students will have reached a level of proficiency corresponding to what they would have achieved after two years of language studies at a campus university.

3.1 The Fluent learning environment

Learners participating in the Fluent project had access to:

- *VoxChat*, an Internet-based audio-conferencing client with a text chat facility
- a dedicated website
- e-mail.

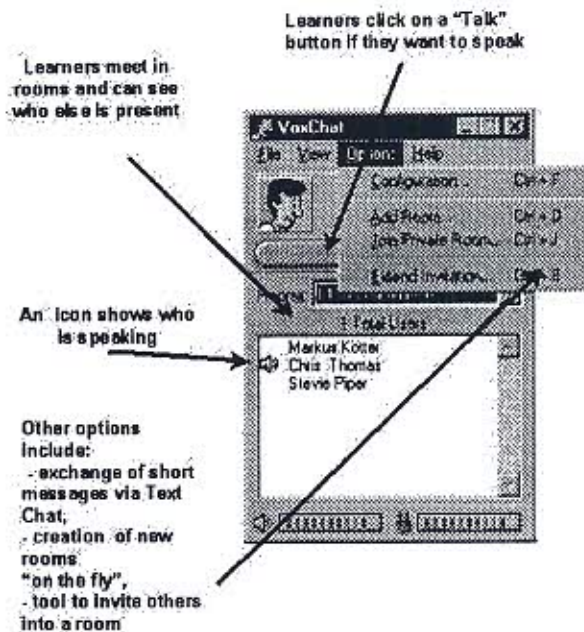


Figure 1: The VoxChat client

E-mail was included to enable tutors and learners to arrange meetings and to exchange drafts, notes or other information while the website was used to provide learners with information about activities, partners' e-mail addresses and technical help. Finally, as shown in Figure 1, *VoxChat* was chosen because it offers a several options which are not available in telephone conferencing; users can "see" who is talking and who else is using the same room, they can 'branch out' into new rooms, exchange brief text chat messages with each other, and they can call for help or assistance by inviting other users to join them whenever they want.

3.2 Learner experience

Data from student questionnaires, in which the qualitative learning experience was investigated, show that participants particularly liked *VoxChat's* speaker icon. Several learners expressly welcomed the fact that the software allowed them "to see who it is who is speaking" and that it was easier to respond to individual members of their group. But students commented on other issues, too. For example, many learners claimed that the reduced amount of visual support such as facial expressions and gestures made it more difficult for them to determine if another student had finished speaking. Moreover, they asserted that the use of the audio client forced them to concentrate much harder on what was being said than in a face-to-face setting. Although a knock-on result of this focusing of learners' attention was that, as one learner phrased it, there was "possibly less chance of being side tracked", students were divided in their opinion as concerns the desirability of this effect. Some felt that the implicit anonymity of the medium made it easier to contribute while others claimed that their oral performance was better in a face to face setting.

Tools such as *VoxChat* require different turn-taking routines from those applying to face-to-face and even to telephone conversations because they require users to click on the "Talk" button before their speech can be transmitted. Students therefore had to take an additional step before they could make themselves heard. As this made it more difficult to use oral back channel cues such as "uhm" or "yeah" to signal agreement or disagreement without interrupting the flow of the

conversation, learners received less, and often retarded, feedback from their peers. In sum, like telephone conferencing, many students were— at least initially— more apprehensive than in a face-to-face environment and there were, at first, considerable gaps when, as students put it, "people were wondering whether to speak or not". However, the length of these pauses decreased as learners became more used to the environment and debates became gradually more lively and animated.

3.3 Use of e-mail

Most tasks required students to meet at least once per week between their tutorials in order to collaborate further on activities which required them for example to jointly come up with solutions for traffic problems in a German town or to prepare a feature for a fictitious radio programme. It was anticipated that students would communicate extensively via e-mail between their scheduled sessions and that they would also hold additional audio sessions. In sum, it was expected that the outline of the project would lead to a substantial increase in students' use of the target language, thus helping students to become more fluent, more proficient, and more confident in their use of the target language.

Project data confirm that more than 60% of the project participants collaborated with each other in writing. This figure even went up to as much as 100% in the spring project during the second German activity and the third French activity. A comparison of the number of students who sent and received e-mail from their peers in the course of the projects and the overall figures of attendance further shows that participants utilised e-mail to circulate drafts of project-related written work amongst members of their group, to arrange and remind each other of on-line meetings and to apologise for absences and to exchange personal information.

Students did not receive instructions about which language to use for their e-mail communication. Yet, about two thirds of the e-mail messages exchanged among French students as well as among the linguistically less advanced learners of German were written in the target language. In addition, even those students of French who used English in their messages generally acknowledged that they were not using French.

I'm sorry this is in English but I'm short of time and want my message to be clear.

Firstly, if you both agree I'd like to spend a few minutes tomorrow speaking in English just to confirm that the software has been proerly adjusted. ...

If Martha could give us the benefit of her experience, initialy in English, it may make the rest of the task easier. ...

(Final level French student)

It seems, then, that, in e-mail messages at least, students were indeed prepared to take risks, acknowledging that it was more important on this occasion to practise the use of the target language than to compose an error-free message

Ich danke Ihnen fuer das (?) e-mail.

Ich habe auch ein paar Vorschlaege, das wir am Samstag betrachten koenten.

(How do you make the umlauts work in e-mail?)

(First level German student)

3.4 Use of the audio client

Learners from each phase of the project could attend between ten and twelve weekly tutored sessions and they were free to hold as many additional meetings amongst themselves as they wished. Tutored events usually began with a brief 'sound check' to ensure that all participants were properly connected to the server. While learners continued to arrive, students and their tutor both engaged in social maintenance conversation (Murray 1991) and discussed matters concerning the actual project work. After five to ten minutes, learners went to different virtual 'rooms' and either continued to work in groups for the rest of the session or reconvened – being called back to plenary by their tutor - for a short de-briefing. In a final session for an activity, however, students and their tutor would stay together in one room for the whole meeting.

A preliminary examination of recordings of students' conversation both in the presence of and without their tutor shows that, like e-mail, learners almost exclusively used the foreign language. Moreover, despite the initial obstacles cited above, learners from both ends of the proficiency spectrum managed to hold meaningful conversations in German and French respectively with and without their tutors. Yet, a qualitative analysis of the data also revealed that learners' engagement as well as their individual success varied depending on factors such as group size, task type, learners' previous language learning experiences, their existing proficiency in the target language and their expectations of the online learning experience.

Students across languages and project phases reported that their confidence in their ability to communicate in the target language had received a massive boost. In fact, the following comment is rather typical of the feedback student offered in the final questionnaires:

I felt obliged to participate and the practice boosted my confidence I was amazed how much I could keep going off the cuff so to speak when I felt other members of the group were expecting my input.

Nevertheless, students responded in different ways to the individual tasks and to the group sizes they regarded as most favourable to their learning styles. Thus, although there is a host of evidence to show that the "output brought about through [...] collaborative dialogue may allow learners the necessary support to outperform their competence and in the process develop their interlanguage" (Swain 1995:137), the mere provision of learners with options to practise a language is not a ready panacea for language learning (Ortega 1997).

3.5 Tutor role

The nature of distance education requires that students involved in this type of learning command a distinct set of strategies that allows them to cope with the specific demands of their studies. Yet it takes time to develop these skills, and learning at a distance is at first a rather unfamiliar and possibly even alienating experience for many adult learners. Thus, although "[a]ll of us are autonomous as a result of developmental and experiential learning" (Little 1996:25), successful online provision also needs to account for learners' individual preferences as well as their past experience.

Appreciating the gap between the participants' ideal level of strategic competence and their present concurrent needs, an approach was chosen that combined the availability and the guidance of a tutor with a set of tasks which were specifically designed to increasingly liberate the learner from overt tutor dependence (Hauck & Haezwindt 1999). Accordingly, tutors increasingly matched their behaviour to the perceived needs of their students in other areas. For

example, tutors of the linguistically less advanced students of German often 'dropped in' to check on their progress and took on a very active role in the management of the discussion. Dealing with more advanced learners, their French counterparts, on the other hand, kept themselves more and more in the background and left it to the learners to invite them if they needed advice. In addition, the German tutorials were framed with plenary meetings at the beginning and at the end of a session while learners of French usually did not come back together as a group before the final plenary session.

Data from the questionnaires suggest that most students were generally satisfied with the role their tutors played in facilitating the interactions. The less advanced learners appreciated that their tutors were patient, pulled conversational threads together and did not "damage the little confidence you might have" while their more advanced colleagues were particularly pleased that they were given time to prepare their responses but that their tutors nevertheless "added little bits of new vocabulary, extended the subject matter of the discussion or brought others in to it". However, learners, especially those from the lower end of the proficiency scale, also maintained that they had hoped for more individual tuition and especially error correction.

Neither tutor offered a significant amount of error correction but tutors now and then intervened verbally or by using *VoxChat's* text chat facility to suggest more idiomatic or correct alternatives to what a student had said. Some tutors also noted down students' errors and e-mailed generalised feedback to all learners in their group on the day after a given session. But although each of these approaches worked to a degree, every option also posed new problems: For instance, e-mailed feedback might arrive too late to be of use, instant written corrections might go unnoticed unless supplemented by verbal explanations and oral feedback *eo ipso* meant an interruption to the flow of the conversation. It thus stands to reason that more research is needed to identify other suitable ways for corrective feedback and that this probably also requires the use of a different set or combination of media.

4. Audiographics

A tool that promised even more flexibility than the combination of audioconferencing and e-mail became available to tutors in the spring of 1999 with the *Lyceum* software, a revised version of the OU-built KMi Stadium (Scott & Eisenstadt). The remainder of this paper introduces selected features of this tool and describes findings from pilot studies using it.

4.1 Lyceum

While the audio component of *Lyceum* provides much the same functionality as *VoxChat* in that users can interact in real time, have equal access to the floor and that a 'rooms' metaphor is employed, allowing users to subdivide into small groups in different 'rooms', *Lyceum* offers its users a choice of three graphic modules: Whiteboard and screen grab tools and a concept map facility. (The last-mentioned is shown in Figure 2 below). Every 'room' contains its own version of each of these tools, thus offering users the opportunity to share and edit graphics and text in small groups or in plenary session.

4.2 Lyceum trials

During the *Lyceum* trials, which were conducted with students of second-level OU German and French courses in autumn 1999, many issues that were prominent in earlier CML projects reappeared. For example, students needed time and their tutors' help to familiarise themselves

